

# Baby Doll

by Gracy

On her way out Nalini reminded her daughter again, "Whoever might come and ring the bell, don't open the door. Even if it is someone you know, open the window and talk to them. Your Achan and I will be back soon."

The girl nodded in agreement. Before going down the steps Nalini waited to hear the sound of the door being closed and locked.

When her father and mother had passed the gate and were out of sight, the girl said to Baby Doll, "Did you hear that, my beauty? Whoever may come, don't open the door!"

Baby Doll closed one eye and smiled. The girl kissed its silky hair, starry eyes, and shiny cheeks and remembered with a smile how angry Amma had been when Achan presented her with this beautiful doll on her twelfth birthday. That night they had an argument.

Amma cried, "Whatever I say, you don't understand. Look! Our daughter has the looks of a 17-year-old, but she behaves like a seven or eight-year-old. If you don't let her grow up what can I do? How would you know the anxiety of a mother?"

Amma had started the argument thinking the girl was asleep. But she was awake, wondering what would happen if she laughed out loud. Then she decided not to. "Let us listen to what Achan has to say." But his voice was full of sadness.

"This time too she made me promise, Nalini." After being silent for a moment, Achan slowly opened the tiny door to his secrets. "I don't know why. When I see baby dolls I can't help buying them, Nalini. Chubby baby dolls take me away somewhere. My childhood was bereft of toys."

Hiding his face in his hands, Achan sat there, hunched up.

In a sad tone Amma murmured softly, "But times are bad, Ravi."

Then she sighed, combing Achan's hair with her fingers.

While wondering why Amma got so anxious about every little thing, sleep came creeping through her eyelashes like dew.

The next day, the girl repeated that question to the dolls lined up in the almira in the bedroom. She had acquired all those dolls by being stubborn about them with Achan. And she shared her happiness and sadness with them.

Yet all of them just stood there in silence, smiling, turning away from her question, staring towards some other world. Suddenly her big eyes brimmed with tears.

One day, when she was ten years old, she got scared seeing blood spreading on the floor in the bathroom and cried out. Her anxious mother came running, but stood there shaking. Then she held the girl close and consoled her.

"Never mind! This happens to all girls. It means you have become a big girl."

But her daughter didn't like it one bit. She always liked to press her face to her mother's stomach and to sit in her father's lap and dish out all the tidbits about what had happened in class.

After the incident her mother scolded the girl often. "That's enough. You are not a little girl any more."

Achan always protested mildly. "Nalini, why the unnecessary objections?"

Amma stared at Achan. "Unnecessary?" By then Amma's eyes began to fill up and her voice became hoarse. Oh, God! How will this girl face the world!

With a faint smile, Achan patted Amma on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

When the doorbell sounded its birdcall, the girl moved the curtain aside and peeped out. It was her neighbor, the cricket player.

Though a college student, he smiled at her whenever he saw her. He would make some small talk and come close.

Pressing her face against the window, she asked, "What is it?"

He asked in a low tone, "Where did your Achan and Amma go?"

"Didn't you know that the uncle and aunt next door were in an accident? They went to the hospital."

"Why didn't you go?"

"I am scared."

Looking at the doll in her hand, he asked, "You like baby dolls, don't you?"

She gave a shy smile, and said, "Yes."

Looking around quickly he said, "I will give you a live doll."

Her face brightened like a flower in full bloom. "Really?"

His voice cracked, "Yes."

"Where is it?"

The curiosity in her tender voice fell on him like a heavy weight. Still, he mumbled, "It is in my room. If you come, I will give it to you."

Slowly putting the baby doll down, she pulled open the door with great delight.